Clues for our common future?
Green art and Floating Land

TAMSIN KERR

ART WORK AND WATER are a powerful combination. Water has always fascinated. Not, as economists might have it, because it is an essential need, nor as scientists tell us, because it is our major constituent. Community water is not the planner’s drain or holding pond, but a chance for recreation. Water is powerful for emotional and spiritual reasons. Large bodies of water stir our souls. A lake’s reflections and ripples make us pause in our everyday busyness; an ocean promises other places, lures us into journeys of dreaming.

But water is both saviour and destroyer; it takes life even while it offers dreams. Floods and tsunami show this in an instant. And now, more insidiously, the seas are rising. The overly busy lives of humans have affected the whole world – our climate is changing, and coastal map demarcations will need to be redrawn. In a place like Australia, where most of us live along the shoreline and its hinterland, this has culture-changing implications. In an island like Tuvalu, they are already living the consequences of the Western world’s fast-paced waste emissions. During high tides, the island is submerged and feet are wet; crops only grow in raised metal buckets; the island is eroding away to the sea’s growing claims.

Tuvalu is our future, writ small – too small perhaps; we ignore its implications at our peril. This is a behaviour in which we humans are expert: we live on the edge of volcanoes, on top of major fault lines, in the path of tornadoes, knowing the impending danger whilst continuing to act in ignorance. And if the danger is of our own making, we remain more wilfully ignorant (making the rational messages of scientists and planners inconsequential). We blithely enjoy the journey, even as the man-made vehicle emits its own destruction.

Environmentalists have worried about the wheels falling off and the consuming speed of the Western capitalist onrush for years, while most of us continue to embrace its material consequences. Is there anything that will fundamentally make us change, or should we just encourage societal collapse in the hope of phoenixes?

There is evidence that we are turning more to the arts: more gallery visitors, more art and craft in our homes. In times of economic depression, we have used art to help restart and connect society – think of all the US federal arts projects that helped lift communities out of the Great Depression (and, for example, the consequent photographic images that remain imprinted as symbols of malaise). Does art also offer value in the face of insidious environmental disaster? Perhaps an art response to climate change is like music on the Titanic, or worse, fiddling while Rome burns.

It depends which metaphor you choose I think. Nero shirked his responsibility through ill-gotten gains (and received the same acclaim as company directors do today). The Titanic’s band stubbornly (some say gloriously) serenaded irreversible doom.

But is art only ever valued in the face of disaster? Instead, art might be our best precursor to change. Art offers soul: our chance to resist the banal solutions of paying the rich to continue to hide the problem – in this case not under the carpet, but under the earth, sequestered in the world’s depths. The political solution puts off change; its standard (and human) response is to support the status quo, even in the face of counter-evidence.

Instead of looking for solutions, art dissolves the problems. Our choice of lifestyle has obvious environmental, social, and economic consequences. Community art participation, drawing upon our own and others’ indigenous traditions, using green and environmental art, helps to build connections to locale, as well as demonstrating (and thereby lessening) our impacts upon other places. Community creativity might change our cultural aspirations by re-invoking questions of spirit and place. (And even if it doesn’t, the metaphors it builds are better than those that spruik of clean coal behind ‘sustainable energy’ hype while denying the key role of renewables. Art is a process we are more likely to both believe and enjoy.) Love of place is more than sentiment or romanticism; it requires an awe of the land’s spirit, a respect for country. The arts convey this non-lingual connection to place; the language of art is older than words and hence converses well with embodiments of the natural.

Art brings us back to moments of stillness. Ephemeral art draws attention to the place it inhabits and to the spirit of itself. Buddhist mandalas comment on the beauty and briefness of life, leaving behind a memory of sand skill, patience and pattern. Environmental art draws us to quieter, more grounded places, often with the same emphasis on patience and pattern. Temporary art invites us
to see the place it inhabits differently, at least for a moment. And in these moments lie our salvation as a culture. Through the multiple layers of the landscape, we see the many ways of being on this earth. And in making green art, we lose our materialistic aspirations; a day at the mall becomes less appealing than a forest lake walk.

A deliberatively ephemeral display constructed with natural materials on and around water reflects our human condition in a very different way to large and permanent sculptures. This is neither the artist nor their society trying for immortality. This is emplacement of brief lives amidst an acknowledged and inhabited place. The temporary object holds memory in a way that makes object, maker, and place more precious. Perhaps it unearths a community’s anthropology, or reflects the world’s state in microcosm. Hopefully the sculpture gives pause to reflect as we admire the beauty of these human/nature collaborations.

Life milestones, when not overly institutionalised, are often celebrated through a community memory of place: wedding trees, roadside memorials, the reason for home birthing. Such places inhabit the edge, between water and land, between night and day, between human and nature. Edge places can be banal, but creative cooperation between human and nature offers something more important than great art. It offers an understanding and memory of place that builds our landscape memoir. Conservative concerns of security oppose such collective creativity, in the process deconstructing the mutual and oftentimes mythic archaeology that ties us to a more-than-human understanding. How should we collaboratively reflect a locale that is always more than rational? Perhaps we might aim to do so in an ecological way, enabling the practice of collaboration between natural beauty and human creativity, as well as revering its consequent symbols and metaphors. Sometimes the metaphors need interpretation, accessed by philosophers and intellectuals as well as artists: we think with our hands and dream with our brains. Green art creates a space in which artists, writers, and audiences might come together to discern and reflect the earth’s patterns: patterns that merge culture and environment. Tim Cresswell reminds us, ‘Place and memory are inevitably intertwined … public memory is inscribed in the landscape’.1 Landscape memoir, drawn from the imagination and creative arts, captures and records the immense stillness of place for

---

a human second. Such is the ephemeral intellect of the outdoor artist, co-working with nature. Green art shows us that this small place and this earth matters.

An exemplar of such art practice has evolved in Floating Land, held every second year, since 2001, on the Sunshine Coast of Australia. As Floating Land has developed, a number of changes have been made. Here, in brief, are four (of many) lessons learnt in running the green art event, as well as an inkling of this year’s offerings.

1. Effective environmental art events need a single base.

Floating Land was started through the passion and drive of the then director of Noosa Regional Gallery, Kevin Wilson, based on the French Les Vents de Forêts. Artists from around the world made works over December 2001 with a focus ‘on water, over water, in water’. These were scattered across Noosa foreshores and hinterland waters, making transport, collaboration, and audience attendance difficult. By 2009, a single site around the quietly spectacular Lake Cootharaba brings all activity to a natural hub.

2. Site-specific art needs local community support.

In 2003, environmental ‘plonk’ art and artists were treated with suspicion by both the local community and council. Perhaps because the art and artist were romanticised and separated from the community, work was vandalised, stolen, or not supported. In contrast, the first half of 2009 sees the Boreen Point community engaged in the forthcoming June event as organisers, artists, participants, and planners over a series of meetings, dinners, and workshops.

3. An intellectual component is vital to link with wider culture.

2005 saw the first alliance of academia with creativity through the Creative Territories international conference at the end of Floating Land. By 2009, the intellectual and artistic components are intermeshed, starting with artist workshops on systems thinking and ending with academics discussing shifting paradigms in nature and culture. Artists (such as Virginia King and Eric Natuovi) and writers (such as Paul Carter and Margaret Somerville) will work together and learn from each other over the ten-day event. The theme of climate change gives meaning and cohesion (as well as meeting funding trends) to these many interdisciplinary collaborations.

4. Acclaim requires the spectacular of nature’s beauty.

In 2007, three international artists led engaging community art and design workshops, but the limitation of the site and the artwork lacked the spectacular. Sydney’s Sculpture by the Sea would be similarly less without the breathtaking cliffs and sands of Bondi – Tamarama. The most successful component of the last Floating Land was the firings on the lake at Boreen Point, and hence the choice of Lake Cootharaba for the 2009 event. The gnarled roots of paperbark trees along the edge of the shallow lake add a deeper texture to that which might evolve.

Christine Ballinger is the current director of Floating Land, having been involved in its gradual evolution from the beginning. She has substantially transformed Floating Land from a temporary outdoor sculpture event into an ongoing community cultural conversation, a hopeful and critical discourse that informs how we live. Having a science and art background, Christine aspires to an ecology of thought that is both intellectual and artistic; a systems thinking that encompasses complex, non-linear processes.

Floating Land, in its maturing, is one model for how we could live more collaboratively with the environment, drawing upon the best of our imagination and creativity. We dream the future in our choice of materials as well as words. Floating Land does this in cooperative partnership with the beauty of water and builds our awe for nature. By thinking with our whole bodies, the more-than-human collaborations offered by green art suggest an optimistic and complex future that we might all inhabit.

Notes:
2. Paul Carter’s 2004 book on Material Thinking The Theory and Practice of Creative Research (Melbourne University Press) and Margaret Somerville’s 1999 Body/ Landscape Journals (Spinifex, Melbourne) helped inform the body of theoretical work behind this article.

Floating Land will be held 19 to 28 June 2009 on the shores of Lake Cootharaba at Boreen Point on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast. To reflect the climate change theme, special guests from Tuvalu will share their lived experience of inundation that forebodes our future. Expect to see art installations and performances, participate in storytelling and workshops, buy from markets and galleries, discuss climate change and culture, see photographers, sculptors, writers and musicians at work, culminating in sunset firings on the lake. Floating Land coincides with the Noosa Longweekend festival and with Noosa Gallery’s two exhibitions on Tuvalu. Further information and bookings: www.floatingland.com.au

Tamsin Kerr is a writer, artist, and director of the Cooroora Institute in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. www.cooroorainstitute.org.